

An examination of the claim that anybody will become evil when in an evil situation - The Lucifer Effect

Evil when done because you think it is your duty or because an authority figure commands it is banal in the sense that there is something pitiful and drab and unattractive about doing anything like you are not your own person. And when it is evil it is so much worse. And the stupidity of using the excuse that you were just doing what you were told is cringeworthy and is hideous in the way irrationality is hideous.

So you may do evil for you were commanded to or asked to by somebody you look up to as knowing better or who is seen as a higher dignity than you are. But if you will suffer few significant adverse consequences or expect few or none then what? Will you do evil as quickly then? Do you need requests and commands to do harm? You do it for you don't feel responsible and that the responsibility is their's. So if you think you can get away with it you won't feel responsible either. Feeling not responsible is what drives you and it is present when you are told to do evil and when you think you can avoid bad consequences you feel permitted by that to do the bad deed. It is a case where the situation is giving the permission or authority rather than a person.

Spontaneous group polarisation describes how a moderate easygoing person who joins a group that validates and replicates the way she or he thinks and feels will through debate and the example of others get gradually more ingrained in the beliefs and even more extreme. That is why you can join a group that is bad and soon you end up evil like it. It is why a person who claims to be pro-life can still worship a Jesus who commanded his religion to keep God's rules commanding that sinners such as adulteresses and bad sons be stoned to death.

The book The Lucifer Effect argues that we will all become dangerous and evil if our lives become terrible enough. Studies on the Lucifer effect seemed to support this. But further studies called it into question. If we cannot blame our bad circumstances for turning us evil, then the evil is just part of us and inside us in the first place. Evil circumstances make the evil person show their true colours.

Every group is a gathering of individuals. A group will feel attacked if one member is and cannot say, "It was done to John not us." It was done to the group for John is in the group. The downside is that it goes two ways, if John is harmed that is about the group. But if John harms that is about the group too. You cannot have it one way without having it the other too. The group is not a group if there is anything one way in it. It is one-dimensional. It is like how saying it is human to be kind but inhuman to be cruel backfires for it dehumanises the person who is cruel. That person is made sub-human.

If anybody can be a Moses, Muhammad or Stalin then there is no room for an "us not them" view. In fact having that view even about an evil group or class or one seen as such is itself an act of oppression and hypocrisy. Its evil. If you were in their situation and if you would do those terrible things then there is no us versus them or them versus us. You are showing your evil by dehumanising them and humanising yourself.